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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: BELARUSIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS VISIT GEORGIA

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Kent D. Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Belarusian Parliamentarians paid a visit to Georgia in late November, with part of the delegation stopping in Tbilisi to meet with Georgian government officials, and two smaller groups traveling into Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian press broadly covered the visit, and speculation was rampant about implications for Belarus' recognition of Abkhaz independence. End Summary.

2. (C) Comment: The relatively even-handed responses by the Belarusian delegation to repeated and constant requests, official and otherwise, as to the reasons behind non-recognition to date, appeared to demonstrate a measured approach to the divisive issue of recognition of Georgia's separatist regions. At this point, this is likely the best the Georgians can hope for as they continue to make the issue of territorial integrity and non-recognition one of their highest foreign policy priorities. The delegations from Minsk said many encouraging things to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; however, their expressions of understanding without firm commitments, and their regular focus on their trip as a fact-finding mission, likely disappointed the separatists to some extent, while also shrewdly keeping Belarus' options open in Tbilisi and in Moscow. The view from Tbilisi suggests Belarus plans to continue to sit on the fence, at least until gas bills come due this winter. End Comment.

MP's Visit Abkhazia, South Ossetia with MFA Blessing

3. (SBU) On 18 November, three separate groups of Belarusian Parliamentarians visited Georgia, with a larger delegation of six traveling to Tbilisi, and two smaller groups of three each heading to Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. The delegation to Abkhazia received the widest coverage in the press, with reports from Georgian and Abkhaz media highlighting particular comments which supported their respective positions. Georgian MFA told us that Belarus had officially informed the Georgian government of their intention to conduct the visit, which would be led by the head of the international relations and CIS committee Sergei Maskeyvich. Upon arrival in Georgia, the group held meetings with Georgian Parliamentary Chairman David Bakradze and Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze in Tbilisi. MFA reported that Vashadze described in detail its version of the events surrounding the war in 2008 with Russia, as longer term view of the conflict. Bakradze stated that he focused his efforts on making the issue of independence a choice for Belarus based on international law and between "peace and violence."

4. (SBU) The delegation to Abkhazia met with the Abkhaz de facto "president" Sergei Bagapsh, the self-appointed Abkhaz "patriarch" Besarion Aplaia, and students at the Abkhaz State University in Sukhumi. They visited areas along the administrative boundary and denounced the "terrible" conditions there. The parliamentarians answered questions from Abkhaz students, such as reasons for the lack of recognition by Belarus of Abkhaz independence, by stating that the process had only just begin, and that there was no effort to slow or create obstacles. MP Smirnov noted in response to an official request from Abkhazia's parliament that Belarus would have to commit to a position. Since the visit, Georgian media has highlighted statements from Belarus that the situation in the separatist zones was "stable" and that no decisions would be made immediately. Qthat no decisions would be made immediately.

5. (SBU) A delegation also traveled to South Ossetia, although this portion of the visit received much less coverage both in Georgian media, as well as in our discussions with Georgian government officials. The delegation leader, Vladimir Kuzhanov, stated that his parliament needed to establish the "closest and warmest" relations with "president" Eduard Kokoity. Kokoity noted that he anticipates recognition by a country he emphasized as having much in common with the people of South Ossetia; however, he expressed his understanding that the decision would have to be Belarus' and that the South Ossetians acknowledged the possibility of different forms of "recognition."

LOGSDON